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Between Jesus and Krishna: Christian encounters with South Indian temple dance

Stine Simonsen Puri*

Abstract

One of the eight national dances of India, bharatanatyam, partly originates from the area around Tranquebar. During the time that Tranquebar was a Danish colony, devadasis, women who did service at temples through dance, were patronised by the Thanjavur royal court. In 1623, a Danish-Icelandic soldier routinely observed the devadasis dancing outside the Masilamaninathar temple opposite Fort Dansborg, which he was guarding. His accounts of the dancers are interesting at two levels; first, they provide us with unique data on the role of the devadasis at the village level in seventeenth century Tamil Nadu. Secondly, they shed light on a certain imagination and perspective on Indian religion grounded in European Christian thought at the time. Since the seventeenth century the dance of the devadasis has undergone a dramatic transformation, as it has been taken from its original setting to a national middle class arena in which girls of very different socio-cultural backgrounds learn the dance now called bharatanatyam. The second part of the article is based on a fieldwork done in one of the bharatanatyam dance institutions situated in New Delhi, and deals with a Christian student and her experiences enacting stories from Hindu mythology in the dance. The focus is on how she reflects on Hinduism as well as Christianity through her dance practice. Parallel to that some methodological reflections on the study on cultural encounters through dance are presented. Though set in very different contexts, the two accounts shed light on Christian perspectives on Hinduism through their encounter with a dominant South Indian dance form.

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Introduction

When Jon Olafsson, an Icelandic soldier serving the Danish King Christian IV in Tranquebar, in the 1620s wrote about the ‘temple harlots’ that he saw dancing in front of the Masilamaninathar temple opposite Fort Dansborg—where he was on daily duty as guard—he was in fact describing the very prestigious *devadasis* of that time, today known in the west as ‘temple dancers’ (Olafsson 1998). They were serving at village as well as court temples in which they had several tasks during the day, of which dancing during prayers and processions was the most important.

Tranquebar, a Danish colony between 1620 and 1846, is located in the area east of Thanjavur, in which most of the devadasis in Tamil Nadu lived. During this time they were generously supported by the Thanjavur court and their tasks were related to temple rituals and to manifest the power of the Nayak king and his dynasty (Kersenboom-Story 1987). Firsthand accounts from Tranquebar are interesting sources on the village level role of the devadasis at the time of the Thanjavur Nayak dynasty. In addition, the sources give insight into a European-Christian encounter with Indian religious and cultural practices. The fact that Jon Olafsson saw these dancers as harlots—and not as the more positive *nityasumangalis* or ‘ever-auspicious women’, as Saskia Kersenboom-Story (1987: xix) claims was the local perspective on the devadasis—is connected to a dominant European perspective on Indian religion at the time, in which Indians were basically seen as worshippers of evil.

Since the seventeenth century the dance of the devadasis has undergone a dramatic transformation, as it has been taken from its original setting, to a national middle class arena, in which girls of very different socio-cultural backgrounds learn the dance now called *bharatanatyam*. To illustrate this transformation, I have included a paragraph on the reinvention or transformation of the devadasi dance into bharatanatyam, which today is considered one of India’s eight national dances. I have done so by focusing on a central person in this transformation, namely Rukmini Devi, who was the first Brahmin woman to perform the dance of the devadasis and give it a new name.

The second part of the article is based on a fieldwork done in 2005 in one of the bharatanatyam dance institutions situated in Delhi, in which the Thanjavur style of Bharatanatyam is practised. The focus is on a Christian dance student and her experiences enacting stories from Hindu mythology in the dance. We will see how the dance not only made her understand the Hindu religion more, but also gave her certain ‘tools’ to worship her own god. Here I will draw parallels between her practice and my methodology as an anthropologist as I also explore Hindu mythology through my position as

an apprentice.

Set in very different contexts, the two incidences of cultural encounters, Jon Olafsson observing the devadasis in Tranquebar in 1623 and Deepakshi Williams practising bharatanatyam in 2005, shed light on encounters between Christian and Hindu cosmologies at very different points in time. Despite their difference of contexts, a basic difference between Christian and Hindu ways of connecting with the divine becomes apparent in both the encounters.

‘Temple harlots’ in 1623

In 1623 Jon Olafsson describes a procession outside a temple of Tranquebar, presumably the Masilamaninathar temple, as situated opposite Fort Dansborg where he was on duty as a guard:

And when the evening drew on, this chariot with its idols and all the foresaid pomp was dragged to its usual place opposite the temple doors. And when they approached with it, all the harlots came out of the church, pagoda sirke, to dance before the gods, and with them their master, who is called baldor. He hires them out every day for money, both to the soldiers and the bachelors in the town, and this money is put into the treasure-house of the temple and is used for its upkeep; but the harlots get their keep out of the revenues of the temple, paid to them by the wardens.

The priests, who usually sits by the church door, and is called brahmeni, also goes out to greet the gods with great humility and obeisance, and then they are carried in, in great honour, by three picked men among them, the sons of the priest, with much beating of drums and loud blasts on the trumpets, and other music, and also the dancing of the *temple harlots* in their finery, which whiles, when they are not serving the gods, is hung up in the church (Jon Olafsson 1998:123, my emphasis)

Saskia Kersenboom-Story (1987) has done impressive work tracing the history as well as the significance of the devadasis in South India. She shows how, prior to the seventeenth century, female dancers had been present in both temples and courts, where they had multiple roles. First, they had an important role at village ceremonies, of protecting the people from the divine forces of village gods, which were considered dangerous. Second, within the Agamic—which later would go under the name Hindu—temples, the dancers served the gods themselves by taking care of their statues and performing for them as well as protecting them during processions outside the temples. And third, they were enhancing the prestige of the kings, who had a god-like status, by dancing at his processions. According to Kersenboom-Story the reason for the devadasis’ presence at all these different functions was because they were considered auspicious as *nityasumangali*, (lit., ‘ever-auspicious

woman') (Kersenboom-Story 1987:19).

Olafsson arrived in Tranquebar in 1623, and served as a soldier at Fort Dansborg for one year. Most historical data on Tranquebar at the time are official documents; therefore his diary¹ is a unique source to experience the daily life in Tranquebar, as it was encountered by an outsider (Fihl 1988). In addition, his account can be of interest for scholars trying to uncover the history of the devadasis, since the coastal area east of Thanjavur is known to have had a well developed devadasi tradition. Tranquebar at this time was under the direct influence of the Thanjavur Nayak Dynasty, which with its significant patronage of the devadasis had a great role to play in terms of the integration of temple and court services of the dancers.

During the time of the Chola Empire (from the ninth to the thirteenth century) when the temples were well supported by the rulers, dance—along with other professions—had become hereditary, which meant that dancers as well as musicians were taught within the families (Kersenboom-Story 1987: 26). Dancers were ritually married to a temple deity while making an alliance with a patron. For their service to the temple, they received an education in dance and language at the temple. As Grinder-Hansen (2009) shows in his article in this volume, education through time had been run by the temples, and therefore devadasis were in a unique position as women to be able to receive an education. The devadasis did not renounce life outside the temples. Some became landowners through their patronage, and they could also have relationships with other men besides the deity and the patron.

But what were the actual functions of the devadasis? Because the devadasis were considered auspicious, they were 'rented' at ceremonies for pregnant females, name-giving and ear-piercing ceremonies and most importantly at weddings (Kersenboom-Story 1987:66). In the above citation, Olafsson translates these economic transactions as sexual transactions. Interestingly, a role closer to that of 'harlots', where one can talk of an actual exploitation of the dancers, did seemingly not become an issue till later, as the patronage of the dancers began declining following changes in the political and economic system when the British gradually came into power.

The routines of the devadasis at the temples that Kersenboom-Story has tried to unravel are based on Sanskrit temple manuals combined with Tamil informants from present-day devadasi communities. It points to a pretty busy daily schedule for those serving at the temples, involving morning rituals, processions, putting god and goddesses to bed etc. Yet, Olafsson's accounts from inside the temple are quite limited, and it is unclear whether he had actually visited them.

Outside the temple, he observed the devadasis from the walls of Fort Dansborg. According to Kersenboom-Story, the ritual participation of the

devadasis was concentrated on the *Cayaratcai puja* (or dusk prayer) in front of the temple, which supposedly was held between 6 and 8 p.m. (Kersenboom-Story 1987: 112). At this time the devadasis would wave and offer torches (or *kumbhadipa*) to keep away evil eyes when they brought out the gods. They would perform a small dance choreography, i.e. the *pushpanjali*, which is a dance of offering flowers to the god or goddesses². Olafsson writes on the dusk/evening prayer:

These aforesaid temple maidens dance always before the gods every night from nine o'clock to midnight, and about the twelfth hour of the night, that is midnight, each of the twelve gods is carried up one street and down another, in a chariot, with torches, fireworks, trumpet-blowing and dancing, also the beating of the drums and other such marks of honour. We who were standing on guard on the walls of the fortress used to hear this every night (Olafsson 1998: 123).

Olafsson's timing for what seems to be the dusk prayers, are later compared to what has been set out by Kersenboom-Story. According to Kersenboom-Story, the gods and goddesses were put to bed between 8 and 9 p.m., but in Olafsson's account they seemed to be up till midnight.³

In addition to the daily dusk/evening ritual, Olafsson also saw the dancers in action during a visit from an assumed patron of their temple. He thus describes the third of the above mentioned roles of the devadasis, namely the enhancement of the power of the patron:

(...) in the winter, the chief of their priests, or bishop came to the town Trangobarich (...) At once there were a great commotion in the town. All the temple harlots set to adorn themselves in their usual finery (...) And when the chief priest, with great company, crossed the river on an elephant, he reclining in a palanquin made of ivory, gilded and adorned with the most costly work in the which he was carried, all this host began to display their usual pomp with drums, trumpets, dancing of harlots and sleights of hand exhibited by the soldiers, and this noise and rejoicing lasted all the way back to the town until he reached the temple. Then all the drums were beaten, trumpets pealed and the women flung themselves about in strange dances, according to their manner, and as their baldor taught them (Olafsson 1998: 127–28).

Olafsson describes the visitor as the chief priest or a bishop; however one may also assume that his status had to do with his position in the Thanjavur Nayak dynasty, from where the village temples received support. The Thanjavur Nayak dynasty between 1612 and 1634 was ruled by Ragunatha Nayak, who by many is regarded the greatest ruler of the dynasty, because of his patronage of arts at the court and his passion for music. He put emphasis on the preservation of culture as compensation for political insecurity, as

the dynasty was surrounded by militarily superior empires (Kersenboom-Story 1987: 39). The patronage of the devadasis was either directly through their service at the court (also called *rajadasis*), or indirectly through the support given to the temples in which the devadasis served. The royalty had a god-like status, thus at their procession devadasis had a somewhat similar role to play compared to that of the deities. They enhanced their power, provided them with entertainment and protected them from the evil forces (Kersenboom-Story 1987: 36).

Kersenboom-Story (1987:42) suggests that the devadasi tradition should be understood along a synchronic axis, in which an exchange took place between local village traditions, the Agamic/Hindu tradition and the court. At an artistic level, the village dance not only imitated the stylization of the repertoire happening in the court, but also those which integrated local elements composed at the court for performance in temples. The level of exchange was also an actual transmission of dancers between village and court temples and the royal court. Already in the eleventh century, it was reported that the ruler of Thanjavur ordered four hundred temple dancers to be brought from nearby village temples, to be attached to the Brihadisvara temple in Thanjavur (Gaston 2005). The exchange was especially strong between the court and the temple of Tiruvarur, some forty kilometres south-west of Tranquebar.

Olafsson's diary cannot be taken as proof of a devadasi tradition, since to a great extent it is framed as an outside perspective on a practice foreign to Scandinavian traditions. His account of the devadasis says just as much about where he is coming from as it does of the life of the dancers. Esther Fihl (1988:122) notices that Olafsson tried to describe the unknown, which he observed with the help of an analogy to the already known, expressing both fascination and judgement. The fact that Olafsson sees the dancing women as harlots may very well be related to a dominant perspective on Indian women at the time as sexually loose. This imagination is more clearly reflected in Olafsson's description of life at the Thanjavur court, which he describes in great detail as a harem, even though he never gets a chance to visit. In other words, whereas Olafsson actually witnessed the devadasis outside the temple in Tranquebar, his descriptions from the royal court of Thanjavur were based on rumours:

But there are other things to tell about the King, firstly that besides his Queen he had, when we first came there, 900 concubines, but afterwards he gave up 300 of them to his son, but not those he kept himself, so that he himself had 600 on his register of sins. These concubines had a handsome and well-furnished hall with gilded pillars round it and windows of crystal glass: to this hall the King repaired daily to choose out for his fleshly lust whichever of them his heart desired (...) Now

since I have already spoken of the King's residence, Travanour, I will speak no more of it, but will briefly touch upon their manner of building temples and such other matters as concern their religion, their sacrifices and their worship of idols and such foolery, whereby I would rouse up each and all always to give God worthy thanks that he has led us here in Christendom out of such perilous darkness of error and the perdition of the damned. Blessed be the name of our merciful God to all eternity. Amen" (Olafsson 1998: 119)

In line with Edward Said's seminal work on the European construction of Occidental and Oriental cultures during colonialism, S.N. Balagangadhara (2005:1) has examined European sources describing India and in particular Indian religion since the medieval ages. In doing so, he sees the sources not as data on India, but as an examination on western culture.

Hinduism is in fact a fairly new construct, which originally was a Persian term to denote the people living at the other side (east) of the Indus valley (Balagangadhara 1994). It was not used to denote a religion till the nineteenth century, and in that sense Hinduism did not exist in the seventeenth century, and also Olafsson does not give a name to their belief system. Here I am using Hinduism to denote the worship of gods and goddesses such as Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna and Shakti, based on the *Agamas*, Sanskrit scriptures. Since the 1990s there has been a general agreement among scholars of Hinduism that colonialism to a great extent has influenced the construction and study of Hinduism. Yet, little attention has been given to the 'pre-history' of nineteenth century orientalism (Sweetman 2004). Will Sweetman argues that one cannot just assume that the 'orientalist' perspective from this period can be extended backwards into the earliest encounters between Europeans and Indians (Sweetman 2004:16).

Balagangadhara argues that the perspective of Indian religion of early travellers and missionaries of the seventeenth century was shaped by dissertations on India written around the sixteenth century by academics as well as by religious scholars, none of whom had actually been to India. Balagangadhara (2005: 71) notices that 'running as a red thread throughout these reports are a description of the sexual mores of the Indians. Generally they present a picture of these peoples as sexually loose.'. This looseness is partly seen in the description of the number of wives of the kings of the Vijayanagara empire in the sixteenth century (ibid.). In addition to this, there were records of ritual practices of Brahmins having intercourse with virgins as well as practices of wife swapping among friends (Balagangadhara 2005: 71–73). Balagangadhara does not go into a discussion on whether this is true or not, but solely sees it as a way through which Europeans questioned the morality of the Indians. (Interestingly that is a red thread running through the Indian perspective on westerners today, which to a large degree is based

on their encounters with western television.)

What seems to incite Olafsson into categorising the devadasis as temple harlots, seems to be the dual role of the devadasis within the temple complex and outside in local society, or what many researchers have referred to as the 'sacred' and the 'secular' functions (Gaston 2005, Subramaniam 1985). It seems as if Olafsson degrades the role of the devadasis both in and outside the temples because of this duality, which was quite different from the life of the nuns in Europe, whose role was centred inside the walls of the monastery. Not that the nuns were an image of the good Christian where Olafsson was coming from, in fact the institution of nuns had been closed as part of the Reformation and the break of Protestantism from Catholicism in northern Europe. Yet, the idea that women in service should not make money or have a life outside the temple seems to prevail. Also, what may cause his categorisation of the devadasis has to do with the fact that they use their sensual bodies in their connection to god. The link between eroticism and divinity has existed in different forms in India, as evident in the Kama Sutra, Tantric philosophy, the bhakti movement (to be described more fully) as well as erotic figures at temple walls around India.

Questioning of the Indian morality, Balagangadharra argues, was tied to disputes between Protestant and Catholic churches in Europe at the time. The challenging of the Catholic church by Protestantism brought about a number of perspectives, which became relevant in the definition of religions, and can be identified in Olafsson's description of local temple rituals and temple dance. As part of the breaking away from the Catholic church, Protestants emphasised the difference of religions. The question of the 'true' religion opposed to the religion based on false presuppositions was raised, and therefore people were to choose among a number of different churches (Balagangadhara 2005: 82). In doing so, he argues that Protestantism had to transform Catholicism—as well as other religions—into paganism. In this context, the religious practices of what we today would phrase as Hinduism, was perceived as pagan or underdeveloped religion. Consequently, the main reason for Olafsson's judgement of the devadasis might simply mean that he does not recognize the religion which they serve.

According to Olafsson a worship of god can only be a worship of something that by itself represents goodness (Fihl 1988: 177). However, the gods which were present at rituals in Tranquebar were not all good. There were not only rituals in which dancers and others demonstrate their devotion to the Agamic/Hindu gods and goddesses, but also rituals in which the dangerous village gods were 'worshipped' in order to keep them at a distance. The belief in evil gods at one point makes him come to the conclusion that they worship Satan:

For their faith is of such a nature that they actually worship Satan, and from him desire and make intercession for all that they regard as of importance for themselves. For they say that they do not need to worship God Almighty, the true and blessed Lord of glory and peace, because he is (they say) good and peace-loving, averse from strife and anger (Olafsson 1998: 129)

When devadasis were dancing in front of the temples when the statues of their beloved gods were brought out, as previously illustrated, their presence was essential for the protection from the evil village gods, whose attention was awoken (Kersenboom-Story 1987). This dual role in which the devadasis both enhance the grandness of the gods and protect them from danger sheds light on the fusion of village cults and the temple tradition of Hinduism, which was probably difficult to grasp for Olafsson. While perceived as pagans, Olafsson describes how he and his friends tried to convince some locals of the rightness of their own god.

Some of us heaped reproaches on those who cared for them, through mediation of our servants, for their blindness in taking the glory from God and giving it to beasts, to which they replied that they could not see God (Olafsson 1998: 122)

The fact that the locals could not *see* the god they were *talking* about sheds light on the importance of the devadasis. Since the religious practice of the area was based on performance rather than text, the role of the devadasis was central (Kersenboom-Story 1995). The devadasis, I imagine—with an awareness that this observation is based on research in a modern dance setting—emphasised the presence of the divine at a visual level (Simonsen 2006).

In order to understand this, I wish to bring in a Sanskrit concept, *darshan*, translated as ‘seeing’, which according to Diana Eck (1988) is an important aspect of Hindu ritual practices today. When Hindus go to worship in a temple, they often use the phrase ‘I am going for darshan’ (Eck 1998:3). The images of the gods and goddesses in the temples that they are going to see are a focus of concentration and a manifestation of the divine itself (Eck 1998:45). It can be argued that the role of the devadasis within and outside the temples took part in the visualisation of the divine by bringing the images of gods to life, through such rituals as feeding the statues or carrying them to their bedchamber (Kersenboom-Story 1987). One way of enhancing the visualisation of the divine is through the humanisation of the statues of the gods. Olafsson observes during a procession what might be thought of as humanisation of the deities, when the statues were kept cool and comfortable with fans once outside the temples, similar to the privileges enjoyed by kings and the like.

In these three seats are placed the three aforementioned gods. On each seat are placed two females with gilded fans, to wave them over these idols, so that no dust, mote or fly should settle or fall on them (Olafsson 1998: 121)

To sum up, Olafsson's account of the 'temple harlots' both sheds light on the role of the devadasis at temple rituals as well as what seems to be royal processions at the village level at a time when the integration between village traditions, Hindu temples and the court may have been at its highest. In addition, I have tried to come to grips with how preconceptions of India as well as the history of Christianity in northern Europe had an impact on the perspective Olafsson had on the devadasis. Since a great deal of sources on the devadasis are from the descriptions of outsiders, it is worth bringing into account what these sources have to say about other things that they experience besides the dancers, as one can get an idea of their perspective on non-dancers as well. On the basis of the above it might be interesting to ask, how and from where the image of the devadasis as prostitutes comes from, an image which has some resonance in India today. Next we will look into a successful attempt to reinvent the dance of the devadasis, which meant that the dance was taken away from the devadasis themselves, at a moment when they had come to be considered immoral.

From the devadasi tradition to national dance

Despite the negative image of the devadasis which Olafsson and other outsiders painted, their prestige was not questioned throughout the time of the Danish colony. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century the tradition was further developed into an art form at the Thanjavur court, designed for stage performance. The 'Tanjore Quartet', consisted of four brothers recruited by the Thanjavur court because of their skills in *carnatic* music (South Indian music), who composed specific music for dance, which today is among the basic compositions for the repertoire of *bharatanatyam*.

However, along with this development at the royal court, the devadasis of village temples received less support because of the shifting political system, which loosened the integration between temples and courts (Kersenboom-Story 1987). This meant a gradual disappearance of the patronage which came to an end with the British colonial power. The devadasis became dependent on money coming from outside the temple walls, and to a greater extent took up the position as entertainers. In this transformation, the devadasi dancers came to be known as *nautch* girls.

By the 1890s an anti-*nautch* movement—later known as the 'abolitionists'—arose among the urban Indian elite, greatly influenced by Christian morality. The active members of the movement were mainly journalists, missionaries, doctors and Brahmins (Allen 1997). The movement

worked for the abolition of the devadasi system which they saw as a flaw in the Hindu tradition. At that time dancers were still initiated as temple dancers, and performed at temple ceremonies in villages. Eventually the anti-nautch movement led to the Devadasi Bill passed in 1947, which banned devadasis' 'dedication' to temples and dancing as part of temple rituals in the state of Madras (Gaston 2005).

Parallel to this there was another movement, known as the 'revivalists', among the elites of Madras, which advocated a revival of the dance of the devadasis. This was first of all part of a heightened national awareness which followed the national movement advocating India's independence from the British. In addition, Mathew Harp Allen suggests that in the beginning of the twentieth century some interesting encounters of foreigners with Indian dance had an effect on this renewed interest for the 'nautch' dance of the devadasi. Unlike Jon Olafsson, the New York based modern dancer Ruth St. Denis, and the Russian ballet dancer, Anna Pavlova, were fascinated by the history of the devadasis and the nautch dancers. Ruth St. Denis was deeply intrigued by Indian religion, and after seeing nautch dancers at an attempt to recreate Indian village life at a fair in Coney Island in 1903, she was determined to one day learn it. She did a number of choreographies, which became popular around the United States and eventually were performed in India in 1925–26 (Allen 1997: 88). Anna Pavlova became familiar with nautch dance through a fellow art student from India who choreographed two dance pieces for her inspired by Indian mythology. Rukmini Devi, who is today considered the most prominent figure in the revival of the devadasi dance style, first met Pavlova in London in 1924, and eventually they became friends.

Rukmini Devi (1904–1986) was born in Madurai in an upper-class Brahmin family. At the age of sixteen she married an English theosophist, George Arundale, with whom she moved to Madras (O'Shea 2006). She became very involved with the Theosophical Society in Madras, which though established in a western setting, was deeply grounded in Indian spiritual philosophy. Allen has argued that the search for an Indian dance *tradition* had strong roots in Orientalist writing and debates, which at the same time influenced the Theosophical Society in India, which again had a role to play within the Indian national movement (Allen 1997: 69).

Because of Devi's fascination with dance, Pavlova had arranged for Devi to study with a ballet teacher. However, eventually Pavlova supposedly told her 'You can learn ballet, but I think that everyone must revive the art of his own country' (Allen 1997: 94). In 1933, Rukmini Devi approached Meennakshisundaram Pillai, a descendent of the Tanjore Quartet, to teach her the devadasi dance (Allen 1997: 73). Then in 1935 at a stage in the Theosophical Society in Madras, Rukmini Devi was the first Brahmin woman who performed the sadir/nautch dance. This marked an important stage in

the reinvention of the devadasi tradition (Schechner 1985:69), which was to take the dance from the temples to the stage of auditoriums, from the devadasi community to the cultural elite from Tamil Nadu to the whole of India. In the years to come, Rukmini Devi established a dance institution, where she taught non-hereditary dancers as well as teachers; she designed a proper dance costume, she systematized the dance and she gave the dance a new name: *bharatanatyam*—which can be translated into ‘Indian dance’. Allen suggests that in doing so she was inspired by the high-classical, fine-art resonances of ballet, with which she had become familiar through Pavlova (Allen 1997).

In the years to come— the 1930s and 1940s—Rukmini Devi was challenged by T.S. Balasaraswati in defining the new dance. Tanjore S. Balasaraswati (1918–1984) was born in Chennai into a family with ancestors dancing at the Thanjavur court, and did her first *sadir* performance at a temple site in 1924. Along with the degrading of the devadasi system, neither Balasaraswati’s mother nor grandmother had been dancing, yet her mother was trained in music. In Chennai, however, Balasaraswati eventually entered the stage set up for *bharatanatyam*. The debate between Devi and Balasaraswati is often thought of as a debate over the space for sensuality in dance and whether something spiritual also can be something erotic. Whereas Devi was developing a dance form, which was respectable, with controlled movements and downplayed emotions, Balasaraswati was emphasising the importance of sensuality in the dance. Devi emphasised the importance of the emotion *bhakti* or devotion, while Balasaraswati emphasised *sringara-bhakti* or devotional love. The debate was simultaneously about the source, and thereby also ownership, of the dance. As a Brahmin, Devi emphasised the relevance of Sanskrit texts for the dance, and positioned the dance within Vedanta philosophy. Balasaraswati, on the other hand, originating from the devadasi community, emphasized its connection to the region of Tamil Nadu in particular the Thanjavur court (O’Shea 2006). From the debate grew different dance styles within *bharatanatyam*, thus Rukmini Devi has become an exponent of the *Kalakshetra*—also the name of her dance institute which means ‘temple of art’—style of *bharatanatyam*, Balasaraswati represents the *Thanjavur* style.

Both abolitionists and revivalists were concerned with an Indian national identity, which was to lead the subcontinent to its independence from the British. In this search for a common cultural heritage, art was of great political significance. In this process, however, the art form was taken from the original practitioners to a national and elitist setting. Janet O’Shea points out that neither Devi nor Balasaraswati represented the local devadasi tradition as none of them dealt with the dance at the vernacular village level (O’Shea 2006) as it existed in Tranquebar. While *bharatanatyam* gradually became a respected national art form, the *sadir* dance of the devadasis serving at the

village temples was banned. Interestingly in the year 1947, the Indian secular nation state was born and in the same year the devadasis were banned as an integrated part of the Indian religious institution. Still, the bharatanatyam dancers of today claim a continuation of the devadasi tradition, which is central to their role as bearers of an Indian cultural heritage. Along with that the devadasis—servants of the gods—are recorded still to serve at temples but enjoy far less respect in India than at the time Jon Olafsson observed them. Because the devadasi system is still illegal in Tamil Nadu, there are no official statistics on their number, yet in the state of Andhra Pradesh, north of Tamil Nadu, there are supposedly 22,941 and in Karnataka 16,624.⁴ Judging from the number of bharatanatyam dance institutions located in the larger cities around India, the number of bharatanatyam dancers far exceeds that of devadasis. While the dance has been taken away from the devadasis, it has become available for middle class women with various socio-cultural and religious backgrounds, and also for foreigners like me.

Exploring the love for Krishna and Jesus

In 2005 I spent six months doing fieldwork at a bharatanatyam dance institution in New Delhi, practicing in the Thanjavur style. Here students, mainly girls aged between seven and twenty five years, come for dance practice a couple of times a week after school. There are dancers with governmental scholarship who come for daily dance and theory classes, in order to obtain a B.A. or an M.A. in bharatanatyam. In the field I took the position as an apprentice (cf. Bundgaard 2003) as a method for understanding aspects of Hindu mythology, since the dance to a great degree consists of enactment from the mythological stories.

Within dance research in India, which had its birth in the 1930s, there has been focus on the ‘recovery’ of dance techniques, often by going through postures sculpted on the walls of temples and classical Sanskrit texts on theatre and the expression of emotions such as the *Abinaya Darpana* and *Natyashastra*. This kind of research has been located in India, and has been supported and encouraged by the Sangeet Natak Academy, a state-funded national institution for research on Indian performing arts, established in Delhi in 1953. Along with the establishment of dance departments at universities, and the opportunity to pursue degrees in dance at institutions, the scope of research has developed. Of late there has been a fair amount of research focusing on the development of dance, from a post-colonial or feminist vantage point—research which the description of reinvention of dance rests upon (see also Meduri 1988, Hannah 1988, Chakravorty 2000). Yet very little research has focused on the dance training from a phenomenological level (Chatterjea 1996). The significance of the dance often seems to be assumed as that of professional dancers, many of them Tamil Brahmins, while the significance of the dance for non-professionals from

less typical backgrounds has not been explored.

Considering the dance institution is situated in Delhi, there is quite a large number of Tamil (Brahmin) dance students. These are generally encouraged by their mothers to learn the dance as part of a cultural education (Mathur 2002). Non-Brahmin dancers generally have to struggle to get their parents to support their dance practice. Most of them explain how their interest in dance has primarily developed from watching dance in movies.

Interestingly, at the dance institution there were a number of Roman Catholic Indian students⁵. In the following, I will focus on one of these dancers, Deepakshi Williams, in order to get an understanding of her aspirations and her involvement with bharatanatyam. At the time of my field research, Deepakshi was in her early twenties and was coming to the dance institute daily as she was pursuing an M.A. in bharatanatyam. Yet, it took some effort to persuade her to let herself be interviewed about her dance practice, since she kept asking me to interview the more senior dancers, who she thought would give me the correct explanation of the significance of the dance.

Deepakshi grew up in a town outside Delhi, with a father who was a teacher, a mother who stayed at home, and a brother who eventually became a teacher. She came to know of bharatanatyam at a Catholic summer school she attended some years ago. She told me:

My parents wanted me to join religious things, so they very much wanted me to become a nun. But I didn't want to go there, but still I wanted to fulfil my parents wish. So I went there to a Christian Institution for one month and joined a summer course. I attended a course in Bharatanatyam, and I saw that they are using hymns from the bible, and they are creating parallels in dance, Christian hymns in dance. So they brought the word of God into the dance. So I found that what the religious people are doing that is the same. They are doing work, religious work in a different way. What the nuns are doing I am doing in a different way. So I joined the B.A. programme in Bharatanatyam, and at that time I found that there is so much Indian heritage, the culture behind, that is bigger than Hindus and Hindu religion.

Deepakshi is comparing her bharatanatyam dance practice with the work of a Christian nun, despite the fact that the daily dance practice consists of praising Hindu gods and goddesses. The comparison seems to be related to her wish to fulfil her parents' desire to be involved in religious work. But what is interesting is that she can find space for her religious identity in an otherwise Hindu dance form.

Deepakshi—and the other Christian dancers at the institute—explained

to me how the dance had made her understand and respect Hinduism better:

It has helped us to know their culture, their religion and their faith (...) there are so many things, stories. But that is not bad; it is a good thing in their religion. It has helped us to understand the people living around you (...) now we respect them. We know how to respect their religion. Before that we didn't know, when they had their *pujas*, what it was.

It not only created understanding and respect, but Deepakshi also felt inspired by the relationship between Hindu god/goddesses and devotee, which she found different from what she knew from her Christian tradition.

How they are representing their gods in any normal way, human, is really good. They have performed their god in a very human way. Like Krishna. So when we see we really feel something. It is good (...) we don't have these things in our religion, but we can make it. Because our god is also human. So why can't we think like that also.

Deepakshi told me that out of the Hindu gods, Krishna was the only one she really liked. Krishna is at the centre of many bharatanatyam dance items, especially the *varnams*—means colour in Sanskrit—which are considered the most important item of the bharatanatyam dance repertoire. Just to give the reader a sense of Krishna's presence in the dance, I will give a short introduction to him. Krishna is considered to be an incarnation (*avatar*) of Vishnu. As a child he was extremely naughty, but was still adored by everyone around him. As an adult he became a lady charmer, and all the milkmaids (*gopikas*) in his village were in love with him. In a popular image of Krishna, he is in the woods dancing with each and every *gopika*, all simultaneously. This is said to illustrate that he has the power to make each person feel his presence at the same time.

At the time of my fieldwork the group of Christian girls were daily practising a *varnam* piece on Krishna. The compositions for *varnams* are most often based on *bhakti poetry* created at the time of the *bhakti movement*. The *bhakti movement* (*bhakti* means devotion in Sanskrit) was an alternative to the Vedic order of the Brahmin priests, as devotees could reach the divine directly by establishing an emotional relationship to gods and goddesses. In *bhakti poetry* the god is thus addressed in a devotional manner. The poetry is written by men. However, the narrator is a first-person female. The poems are about a *nayika* (heroine) longing for her beloved Lord, the *nayaka*⁶ (hero), who in many cases is *Krishna*. In the dance movements, the dancers perform both the part of the *nayika* and *nayaka*, but with a focus on the *nayika* or female devotee.

The focus of the *bhakti poetry* as well as the *varnam* dance items in which *bhakti poetry* is enacted, are the emotions rather than the plot. As a

dance student one learns to express nine basic emotions or bhavas: love, happiness, compassion, anger, courage, fear, disgust, wonder and peace. All these emotions can be present in a varnam dance item, as a devotee goes through various states in her relationship with her hero/god.

Before any performance of a varnam item, a presenter explains to the audience that the dance item represents ‘the longing of the individual soul for union with the divine’. This is in line with Rukmini Devi’s interpretation. To understand the spiritual/philosophical framework which this phrase is based on I will make a reference to Vedanta, by which Devi and the Theosophical Society were very much inspired. Vedanta is associated with the *Upanishads* scriptures in which the divine is represented in a mystical as well as monistic way. In this philosophy the *atma* or supreme soul is one single entity residing in each being. Yet, in day-to-day life the *atma* is divided between an individual soul (*atma*) and a supreme soul (*paramatma*), as people do not realize the unity (Sahay 1998:70). The goal of human existence is its absorption into the supreme soul of the universe, and the method for this is by looking inward, in order to realise how one’s own soul is connected with the divine soul.

Generally, all the Hindu dancers from around fifteen years of age or more thought of their bharatanatyam dance practice as spiritual, and used the above framework to explain how. The dance, they say, is a method of realising the divine within, as they embody the different gods and goddesses (Simonsen 2006). Anne Marie Gaston (2005) has argued that the desire for the spirituality of bharatanatyam is actually a desire for social acceptance. She claims that if the dance had not been acknowledged as spiritual practice, it would not have been accepted because of its erotic content (Gaston 1996). I am not claiming that the dance is not spiritual practice for the dancers, but just that the verbalisation of spirituality also serves as a kind of veil for the dancers (Simonsen 2006). Interestingly, were the only ones I came across who do not repeat the general phrases, related to the spirituality of the dance.

When we are performing and praising Shiva, it is all about telling a story about Shiva (...) if I am successful in presenting the story the people understand and get into the bhakti (devotion). But we just show, that is our target.

Here Deepakshi describes the dance as a form, which might have to do with the example being on Shiva and not her adored Krishna. She also conveyed how she could feel bhakti herself, doing the dance items on the Hindu gods and goddesses while imagining her own god. She gave several examples of how certain movements were reinterpreted into a Christian cosmology.

We think of it as praising God. We use the dance for praising *our* God.

For example we did a dance on Jesus that we performed at the Mass. When we do the aarti (makes a circle with a light for prayers), it is like when you give Jesus' flesh and blood at the altar.

In another example, Hindu ritual movements were given a non-Hindu significance by bringing in the more neutral and all-encompassing 'mother earth'. Before and after any dance practice, all dance students do a small ritual of respect (*namaskar*) in front of a statue of Nataraja, the dancing Siva, who has been considered a symbol of the power of classical Indian dance, since the time of the 'revival' of *bharatanatyam* (allen 1997). When asked about that daily ritual and what it meant to her, she answered:

We have this thing that we see the earth as our mother. So when we are doing the *namaskar*, we are apologizing for hitting her, when we are stamping the ground while dancing.

One aspect which in Deepakshi's mind seemed to differentiate her relationship with Hindu and Christian figures, was a question of faith:

I like the stories very much. But I don't believe in them, because they never happened. I only believe in Jesus.

This illustrates a basic difference between Christian and Hindu world perspective related to concepts of time. Whereas the Christian faith rests on a historical premise, based on the idea of Jesus as a historical 'real' person, within Hinduism, the realness of the gods and goddesses comes from a recognition or the presence of mythic time, which is experienced in a practice like *bharatanatyam*.

For me, the dance was an entry to the comprehension of mythic time. According to Kirsten Hastrup, in theatre (and dance theatre) there is a 'duality of time', where historical and mythical time fuse, as the actor becomes one with their part. From this transcendence of time an 'uchronia' emerges, described as 'another time or a history nowhere in time' (Hastrup 2004: 150). This conceptualisation of the uchronia of theatre helps me grasp how I experienced the uchronia of Hindu cosmology. For me, along with the dance practice, the Hindu gods and goddesses became real, but neither as historical beings of the past nor as living beings in the present, but as meaningful characters present in an expanded 'uchronic' cosmology.

As a consequence, understanding Hinduism became less of a question of belief than one of cosmology, or the space inhabited by historical and mythic beings (Simonsen 2006). This was quite a different way of relating to divinity, than what I had been used to in Denmark, where the presence of god seemed more like a verbal construction, tied to the stories of Christ from the New Testament. I am aware that there are churches within Christianity, which like the *bhakti* movement emphasize the direct connection to god based on

love. However, I, who was baptized into a Lutheran-Evangeline church, have been introduced to a Christian conceptualisation of god through visits to a number of churches around Denmark, as well as the general ongoing debate about Christianity. In the dance however, the connection to what had been conceptualised as divine, became closer to what I thought of as a relationship of love between man and woman, since it entailed emotions and eroticism.

On the basis of a discussion on religious experiences among Catholics in Malta, Mitchell argues that belief is based on three different but related modes of cognition: semiotic, practical and emotional (Mitchell 1997:79). According to Mitchell, the Maltese people develop a perception of god through the stories told in the Bible (semiotic), through ways of bowing in front of the images of Jesus in the church (practical) and through the memory of feelings of being close to god (emotional) (Mitchell 1997:86).

These three modes of cognition were also at stake for both the Hindu and Christian dancers. The difference in religious traditions seemed to be a question of the manner in which one could connect emotionally to god. Interestingly, Deepakshi thought that the mythic Krishna is represented in a more human way than the historical Jesus. The humanism I believe has to do with the way that one as a believer/devotee can approach him, not just as a disciple, but as a lover. Thus Deepakshi wanted through *bharatanatyam* to learn to approach her god with devotional love.

However, she hinted that this could not alone be done by transferring Christian stories into the dance since they are quite different compared to Hindu myths and *bhakti* poetry. This again has to do with the limitations of supposedly historical stories, as illustrated below:

I played one dance drama on Jesus, and in that I was the soldier who beat Jesus. And that part I didn't like, because I felt that I was beating Jesus. I don't know what it would have been like to play Jesus, because I never did that part. The girl who was doing that part, I did not like that girl, so I was just thinking that I was beating the girl and not Jesus (laughing).

When all this is said about religion, dance for the Christian *bharatanatyam* dancer, like for other dancers as well as the *devadasis*, is tied to goals which do not have to do with only religion or spirituality. For Deepakshi, her *bharatanatyam* training would among other things give her an opportunity to become a teacher like her father and brother. When asked about her dreams for the future she told:

I want to finish the MA and then go to Mathura and teach for two years to earn for an MA in English. I want to teach in a college there. Mathura is the birthplace of Krishna, everyone there worship Krishna. Eventually

I want to establish my own dance Institute. What we are doing here I want to learn more of. I want to experiment more, because the dance is so large. I want with this to perform something in my religion

Deepakshi stressed her wish to have a job and generate her own income, as a means to sustain her independence after marriage. A bharatanatyam career is sought for, which integrates a means of income with religious endeavours. It was among other things this dual role of the devadasis, as both spiritual and economic beings, which Olafsson seemingly had a difficulty in accepting.

It is worth noticing here that Deepakshi's position in the field was not different from my own. As a Christian she was using the dance practice to get to know Hinduism better and simultaneously to pursue an academic degree. So was I. The methodology of dance ethnography (Buckland 2006), through which I engaged in the field as an apprentice, in my case was a unique method for a cross-cultural and cross-religious understanding situated in the body, as embodied knowledge (Simonsen 2006). This way of encountering the dance as well as Hinduism, for Deepakshi as well as me, was quite different from how Olofsson encountered the devadasi dance, and for quite obvious reasons.

Closing reflections

In dealing with cultural encounters in Tranquebar there was a glaring absence of the devadasis' account of their life and encounters with outsiders, the reason being that documents written by them do not exist, and in that sense the devadasis do not have a voice in this article. The second part of the article, in which a Christian bharatanatyam dancer describes her experience with the dance, is not meant to make up for this missing link. Rather it illustrates the extent to which the devadasi dance form has changed along its way into the national arena, as it has become open to so many different levels of interpretations, while being heavily framed by a certain Sanskrit-dominated discourse. The article illustrates how art/ cultural practices and religion in India are tied together, and therefore an encounter with dance is also an encounter with questions of religion.

Notes

- 1 The memories were written down a couple of years after returning home, thus the stories have probably been developed according to the interests of the listeners. The descriptions from Tranquebar are part of a larger account of his life and years of serving under Christian IV completed by his son on the basis of the stories told.
- 2 A dance item often performed at the beginning of a longer dance performance among present day bharatanatyam dancers (Simonsen 2006)

- 3 To get a sense of the significance of professions in a more easily accessible present, Andersen's article in this volume provides us with an exciting insight into processions in present day Tranquebar and the nearby area (Andersen 2009)
- 4 Numbers from census of India 2001. Kersenboom-Story (1987) as well as Anne Marie Gaston (2005) have done fieldwork with a few devadasis who remain in the area around Thanjavur, in order to get an idea of the devadasi tradition as it was in the past and how it has survived in the present.
- 5 The Christian population constitute 2.4 per cent of India's population (Census of India 2001)
- 6 Notice the connection to the word for king, Nayak, during the time of the Thanjavur Nayak Dynasty, which support the argument that the king enjoyed a god-like status

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